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Should Faculty Members That Is the Wrong Question

Two conflicting perspectives

In *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2008), Stanley Fish argues that faculty members should not educate students in values but should focus on instructing them in the methodologies of the disciplines. In a recent faculty survey, 99 percent identified developing the “ability to think critically” as “very important” or “essential.” Only a fraction of the same faculty members viewed “enhance students’ self-understanding,” “develop moral character,” or “develop personal values” as “very important” or “essential” (Lindholm et al. 2005). An increasing consensus in the academy is that faculty members should not help students discern a meaningful philosophy of life or develop character, but should instead help them master the content and

methodology of a

given discipline and learn critical thinking.

Academic professionalization and specialization recognize the faculty member’s mastery of method and a discrete sphere of knowledge while insisting that ultimate questions be bracketed from the academy. Early in the twentieth century, Max Weber (1946) argued for the separation of knowledge and morality, insisting that values are not scientific and cannot be defended via reason. In *The Making of the Modern University* (1996), Julie Reuben tells the story of how American higher education has increasingly moved toward this separation of knowledge and morality.

Faculty reticence about addressing values and virtues is understandable from a number of additional perspectives. The view that moral development is or should be off limits makes sense from the perspective of faculty members’ unease with reductive versions of character development, which tend toward ready-made answers and moral indoctrination. The hesitation may be reinforced by an unwillingness to

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Teach Virtues and Values?



impinge on sensitive areas, which, it is believed, have as much to do with the private sphere of religion as with any other factor. Further, much of what was once promulgated as virtuous was not virtuous at all, and many moralists are themselves not models of virtue. The fear of hypocrisy diminishes the voices of those who are modest enough to recognize their own weaknesses.

At the same time, academic leaders trumpet that college develops students as persons and helps them become better citizens. Although not unaware of the extraordinary challenges, books by prominent former presidents, such as Derek Bok (2006) and Howard Shapiro (2005), do not swerve from embracing the ideals of moral and civic education.

College mission statements and promotional materials tell us that a college education prepares students not only for a job but also for life. Fish cites—and mocks—Yale’s mission statement, which suggests that students will develop their “moral, civic, and creative capacities to the fullest” (2008, 11). For the idealists, college is not only about learning a subject but also about articulating ideals, recognizing one’s responsibilities to those ideals, and developing a sense of wonder about future possibilities for oneself and the world. In short, it is about understanding—through deliberation on great questions and the development of new capacities as well as through other formative experiences, such as conversations with faculty members and fellow students—what kind of person one is and what kind of person one wants to become. Late adolescence and early adulthood represent a privileged time for the exploration of new ideas and the formation of identity; as a result, for many students, the college years become crucial markers for who they are to become. During these years students develop, or fail to develop, capacities for integrity and courage, for diligence and self-sacrifice, for responsibility and service to others. They also develop, or fail to develop, a love of knowledge, a capacity to learn from criticism, and a sense of higher purpose.

A recent study entitled *The Spiritual Life of College Students* shows that students long for this idealistic form of education: 76 percent of students report they are searching for meaning and purpose in life, and 74 percent state that they discuss the meaning of life with friends

(Higher Education Research Institute 2005). In *Making the Most of College* (2001), Richard Light notes that the most common hope expressed by students when they embark on a new class is that it will somehow change them as persons. Developing virtues through education is an old and venerable ideal. In the most influential early modern treatise on education, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, John Locke wrote: “Tis *Vertue* then, direct *Vertue*, which is the hard and valuable part to be aimed at in Education” (1968, 170).

But how does one rhyme these two conflicting worldviews? On the one hand, college does not and should not teach values. On the other hand, college helps students develop values and become better persons.

Given our tendency to compartmentalize, a common strategy is to parcel out critical thinking to the faculty and distribute character development to residential life and the extracurriculum. In activities ranging from music ensembles and student publications to varsity athletics and community service, students find outlets to develop personal habits and social qualities that they will need after college. These activities, as meaningful as they are for students, are not necessarily linked, however, to the distinguishing characteristic of college, which is intellection. Faculty sometimes lament that residential life does not do enough to keep the intellectual flame alive. The tables are rarely turned. Hardly, in the current climate, will someone in residential life criticize faculty for ignoring moral formation. The increasingly accepted position after all is that faculty members are no longer responsible for moral formation, and if they were to engage in it, they would surely do a poor job. But faculty members do not ignore moral formation. Despite their caution, reticence, and open denials, faculty members are heavily engaged in the moral formation of students.

Character and intellectual virtues

The critical inquiry model and the moral formation model are not so easily separated. As Mark Schwehn notes in *Exiles from Eden* (1993), many intellectual pursuits presuppose virtues of character, and so the two often develop in tandem. For example, to prepare well for each class by completing all assignments, rereading materials, making appropriate notes, and reflecting thoughtfully is to elevate study

over other available pleasures and is as such an illustration of temperance. To renounce such pleasures, despite their legitimate allure, for a higher value is both a character virtue and an intellectual virtue.

Discussion classes test and develop many additional virtues. To listen carefully to the views of others and to weigh them honestly, giving them a full hearing with your utmost attention, even if they should contradict your initial inclinations, is to practice a form of justice. To participate in the give-and-take of discussion by asking clarifying questions of other students, offering evidence to support your own positions, or proposing alternative perspectives in light of disagreements is to exhibit respect for other people and for the common value of truth. To encourage effectively the participation of others and successfully draw good ideas out of them is to exhibit intellectual hospitality. To challenge the views of interlocutors without making the attack personal, and thus without drawing them away from the search for truth, is to practice diplomacy. Humility is evident whenever students recognize that they must withdraw an idea from discussion in the face of decisive counterarguments, that they haven't discovered the answer to a particular puzzle, and that they must continue to listen attentively to the views of others. To hold on to a view even against consensus when one is convinced of its validity is to experience social isolation for one's belief in truth and is an act of civil courage.

To search for truth is to be engaged in a variety of character virtues. The decision to pursue all evidence, even if it should contradict or weaken one's initial claims, is a mark of honesty and integrity. To think an issue through to the point where all angles have been explored and every ramification considered requires discipline and perseverance. A willingness to abandon previous beliefs in the light of more compelling evidence presupposes a capacity for flexibility and self-overcoming. Patience and striving are both fostered when students recognize that, despite their best efforts to date, their tentative answers to a given puzzle remain inadequate, and they must continue to delve further.

Similarly, if we lack certain character virtues, then we will make intellectual mistakes.

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Arrogance leads us to think that our abilities are greater than they are and that we see more than we really do, which can lead to our dismissing arguments that might indeed be worthy of our attention. Similarly,

if we become defensive or emotional, the clarity of thought needed to make a wise decision suddenly becomes cloudy. An indulgence in worldly things disproportionate to their actual worth can distract students from the focus and concentration necessary to handle difficult and compelling questions that require extended attention. Complacency can result in students not devoting the effort and discipline to understand an issue fully. Greed can lead us to elevate external recognition over ideas themselves and can even tempt us to dishonesty and the fabrication of data, a violation of one of the necessary conditions for truth and a culture of truth.

Along with academic preparation, motivation is the greatest indicator of success in college (Kuh et al. 2005). For faculty members to ignore motivation as irrelevant or to overlook the wide array of character traits noted above is to lessen chances for student learning. Such abandonment may also reduce opportunities for postgraduate employment, given the interest among employers in integrity and motivation, passion and discipline, and interpersonal and teamwork skills. *Job Outlook*, the annual survey of prospective employers published by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, regularly lists among the most desirable traits of future employees such personal qualities as "strong work ethic," "teamwork skills (works well with others)," "initiative," "interpersonal skills (relates well to others)," and "flexibility/adaptability."

Teaching virtues and values

Not only do we as faculty members educate students in virtues and values, we want to do so. The very faculty members who stress critical thinking and often shy away from discussion of values lament that today's students are too oriented toward material gain and insufficiently interested in values. When I served as dean, overseeing some five hundred faculty members, I had a simple box lunch with a random group of seven or so faculty members about three times a week. The full hour was

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devoted to whatever topics faculty members wished to discuss—questions about policies, suggestions for improvements, whatever was on their minds. At least two-thirds of the time, the topic was how to get more out of our students, how to help them learn more, flourish more, become more ambitious, develop as intellectuals. That is a faculty that cares about students and about student learning beyond the simple acquisition of technical skills, a faculty that wants to have a broad and lasting impact on students.

Little has pleased me more than receiving notes from former students thanking me for having played a formative role in their development. My experience is not isolated. The desire to have a salutary impact on students is widespread, and so it is perhaps fair to say that faculty are as conflicted as students: while students seek financial gain *and* answers to their great questions, faculty members want to focus on disciplinary knowledge and critical thinking but also rejoice when they have connected with a student in a deeper and more meaningful way.

The idea that one can teach virtues in an intellectual context is an ancient one. Plato wrote dialogues partly to exhibit the ways in which ideas relate to various life-forms. Plato interweaves the criticism of ideas with the evaluation of persons. Individuals who are full of themselves, dogmatic and self-assured, are not likely to uncover truth. Interlocutors who are insufficiently self-confident to entertain views from the opposition will also fail to gain knowledge, as will those who have no serious

interest in the genuine pursuit of truth. Someone, on the other hand, who is willing to admit errors and give up false claims to knowledge is on the right path; and a person who is willing to risk his or her identity, reputation, and life in the search of truth is also likely to be on a meaningful, if potentially tragic, journey.

Socrates did not separate reason and morality but insisted that we must be able to give a rational account of our moral decisions, and not only give an account: philosophy for Socrates is about how we relate our lives to those ideas. This is clear not only from his discussions of piety and justice in the wake of his trial but also from his subtle portrayal of the intellectual values and ethical virtues that are necessary conditions of meaningful discourse. We cannot truly enter into the sphere of dialogue without trying to understand the other person's position, seeking to make our own positions understandable, evaluating all positions fairly, elevating the principle of consistency, believing in the possibility of truth, and recognizing that ideas have consequences. It is not that one chooses to do so; these intellectual values and ethical virtues are necessary conditions of meaningful discourse, an insight that has been developed in our age particularly by the German philosophers Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, and Vittorio Hösle.

Because faculty members are sometimes not conscious of their engagement with intellectual virtues, they often convey such virtues by what they do. Things could be worse: unconscious modeling can be a more powerful source of

education than explicit discourse. One is reminded of the line attributed to St. Francis: "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words." Students have an intuitive sense for the Socratic insight that what is important is not only how to argue for a set of propositions but also how to relate those propositions to how they live and what they value. Faculty serve as models of scholarly engagement, intellectual curiosity, clear thinking, persuasive rhetoric, moral integrity, or community service, to give just a small number of examples.

Modeling is a classic idea in pedagogy; it was recognized already by Plato, who presented Socrates as a model of reason and virtue. Cicero notes that we tend to imitate those we admire and those admired by our community, for good and for ill. This pedagogical concept continues in modernity with classical theorists such as Locke and Rousseau. Locke notes that there is "nothing sinking so gently, and so deep, into Men's Minds, as *Example*" (1968, 182). In *Emile*, Rousseau writes unambiguously that "man is an imitator" (1979, 104). While we hope primarily to model good thinking and good action, it does not hurt for students to see our struggles. Rousseau wisely notes, "show your weaknesses to your pupil if you want to cure his own. Let him see that you undergo the same struggles which he experiences" (334).

Among the basic principles with which we are familiar from pedagogy are that students learn more when they have an existential interest in the subject matter, are in a diverse environment, are actively engaged in the learning process, learn from their peers, and receive meaningful feedback toward their learning goals. Every one of these principles is present in a good discussion class, where students engage a fascinating topic, experience give-and-take with one another and with often diverse readings, and receive feedback from faculty members and often from peers. In one of my seminars several years ago a student recommended that, in addition to the extensive feedback my students were receiving from me, they should give feedback to one another. I liked the idea, and with some advance notice, I asked every student to offer a sentence of praise and a constructive suggestion for every other student in the class. I reformatted the submissions, so that each student received a page of anonymous praise and a page of anonymous suggestions. I was fascinated by

how insightful the peer comments were and how meaningful students found the combination of generous praise and diplomatic, but demanding, criticism from their peers. Each set of statements required intelligence and diplomacy, attentiveness and evaluation.

Should faculty members address values and virtues? We already do, though often unthinkingly—not a great attribute for a profession that prizes thinking. But maybe we can borrow a chapter from those who prefer to elevate technique over higher purpose and reflect more fully on *how* to do better what we already do. Here the question would be, how do we as faculty members best help students develop virtues and values? □

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